

The University of Chicago

THE ECONOMIC ETHICS OF JOHN WESLEY

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1936

By
KATHLEEN WALKER MACARTHUR

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Serious social disorders arising out of almost world-wide economic maladjustments are particularly disturbing at the present time. Social experiments, both political and economic are much discussed. The will to change in the direction of amelioration and improvement seems general enough, but it is extremely difficult to secure agreement upon method.

Without some recognized standards of value, based upon ethical considerations, social justice and the preservation of personal values can have no guarantees. Where are such ethical principles to be found? Among the possible sources of them, one turns with expectation to the history of religion, and in particular to the ethical teachings of Christianity, and the experience of the Christian group.

Selecting a period in which both economic and social problems were very acute, namely, the decades of the eighteenth century leading up to the "Machine Age," there is discovered a religious leader who faced this problem of an ethic for economic life with a technique of applied religion that had some notable results. Such an historical record, if not definitive for us today, is at least instructive.

In the attempt to discover how John Wesley, as the leader of a religious movement, met the problems of his day, it is found that his interest in the affairs of life, and his practical wisdom regarding them, is much greater than has been generally supposed. This discovery leads to an entirely new estimate of Wesley himself, and what is even more significant, to a reconsideration of the importance of the religious motive in establishing an ethical basis for social and economic relationships.

For more than a century Wesley was regarded as primarily a saint and an evangelist, having little or no regard for this world, in his eagerness to save souls for a world to come. It would be folly to attempt to reverse that opinion, for the saving of souls was undoubtedly a large part of his purpose, but the statement must be modified to recognize the close relation he felt between the world to come and the life that now is. This

has been made quite clear in the more recent biographies, which stress his social activities. He was greatly concerned to make good citizens in this world as well as to fit them for another.

It is only by examining his own writings that one finds how very intimate was his acquaintance with the concerns of the economic life, and how intelligently he thought about them. To discover the extent of this interest, and the means by which Wesley set about correlating the religious life with the social and economic needs of his people, is the specific purpose of this study.

The method used for testing this assumption of Wesley's effective joining of the religious impulse with the ethical motivation of life was the obvious one of going to the primary sources. For this purpose, the new Telford edition of the Letters, published in 1931, offered access to a relatively new body of material, which has been used extensively in this work. For the theological presuppositions buttressing Wesley's ethical standards both the Sermons and the Letters have proved most fruitful.

The approach throughout has been social-historical, thus calling for a brief survey of the historical events and social conditions in the eighteenth century, relevant to the theme. The activities of government, both Parliamentary and municipal, under the Hanoverian monarchy; the tensions among Church parties; the relative freedom of worship and conscience permitted; events at home and abroad that contributed to the tendency to religious inertia and moral slackness.--have all been touched upon. Here, and in all the sections describing the times and appraising Wesley and his work within those times, a wealth of secondary material was called into use, as is indicated in the Bibliography.¹

Not to repeat in too much detail the many descriptive histories of economic conditions during the eighteenth century, only a few typical and very general problems have been sketched, to indicate the nature of the economic changes being wrought in both city and country, changes which both gave occasion for the enunciation of Wesley's ethics, and offered opportunity for the kind of religious leadership he was prepared to give. How the rise of England's major industries coincided with the awakening of large masses of working people to a recognition of their worth and possibilities, and the consequent growth of a great middle class, is also described.

¹See the complete dissertation in the files of the University of Chicago Libraries.

Wesley's movement followed the trail of the homeless and landless men, to where they congregated in the new industrial centres, and his chapels sprang up among the lodgings of the workers, a fact to which a great deal of his success was due.

After placing Wesley and his movement in the political and economic currents of the time, it is necessary to regard him in relation to the intellectual life of his period also. Here are found some of the greatest influences molding the character and the ideas of Wesley himself. A very brief outline of the current Rationalistic and Deistic philosophy is given as background for the description of the state of the Church and of religion generally. Since wholesale condemnation of the Established Church can serve no sound historical purpose, and is unwarranted in any case, an attempt has been made to indicate the nature of the difficulties besetting the State religion, as also the Dissenting groups. Pietism, working within the Churches, among individuals as well as in the Religious Societies, prepared men of all creeds to respond to the challenge of Wesley's movement, and to set in motion the Evangelical Revival in its more general form.

From this general description of philosophy and religion, we move to a more particular consideration of Wesley's own religious thinking, and the specific doctrines that support his ethics, with a side glance at the current interest in his "Calvinism." The doctrines discussed include, along with the orthodox beliefs he held in common with all Churchmen, those which came to be especially characteristic of Wesleyan teaching, such as Christian Perfection, the Witness of the Spirit, etc. Thus Wesley's ethical teaching is shown to rest back upon solid doctrinal supports, and religion appears as the end or ideal of ethical conduct, its authoritative source, and the moral dynamic that gives effect to ethical ideals.

As a prelude to the setting forth of Wesley's pronouncements on economic ethics, a further sounding of the possible sources of his ethical ideas is undertaken, in a brief enquiry into environmental factors. This biographical material gives ample evidence that there was much in Wesley's life to explain his particular tendencies. Because of the high importance he placed upon experience, in his religious teaching, it is reasonable to suppose that his own experience was a powerful factor in

shaping his thoughts and actions, hence the consideration given the biographical episodes related.

In the selection of material to illustrate his ethical standards in economic life, the Letters and the Journal are found to be highly productive sources. From among the thousands of entries and references, relatively few could be included in this work, but they suggest the wide range of his interests, as well as the activity of his mind as it engaged these problems.

In general, it was found that Wesley was urgent in applying religion to the practical issues of life. The whole of life must be brought under the positive direction of the religious spirit. He was tireless in his efforts to inculcate the virtues of temperance, thrift, honesty, industry, self-reliance,--qualities of much significance in the growing industries of England. His success in this had much to do with the development of the middle and lower classes. He felt himself laid under a particular charge toward the miners, colliers, and iron-workers of remote communities, where isolation and poverty had their most brutalizing effects. He must help these men to achieve self-respect, to become law-abiding citizens, honest and happy workers, and zealous Christians.

He believed that the Christian religion could change men's lives, and actually create between master and man a community of interest, a reciprocity of responsibility issuing in fair wages, fair labor, and right relationships.

Part of his ethic consisted in the familiar religious injunctions to thrift and simplicity of living. He had much to say about the folly and wickedness of luxurious living, the vanity, waste, and self-indulgence of costly dress as symptomatic of the destruction of the finer aspirations of the spirit. But, in his view, the economic miseries of men are brought about chiefly by want of moral conduct among rich and poor alike.

One of the definite objectives he set before himself and his preachers was the stopping of the practices engaged in by the tinnerns and laborers on the Cornish coast; the smuggling trade, the plundering of wrecked vessels, the robbing and even murdering of survivors. Here he would supplement his challenge to personal repentance by applying social pressure. He called upon employers to suspend the employment of those found guilty of such crimes. For himself, he expelled them from his societies.

The buying and selling of East India stock on margin was another economic wrong in his opinion, and the endorsing of bills beyond one's ability to pay was strongly attacked. Cheating, or taking advantage of the ignorance or need of another in trade was strictly prohibited among the Methodists. More than once, moreover, Wesley hastened to a town where an election was about to be held and spoke to each of his voting members on the question of bribery. Loyal as he was to King and Parliament, he made indignant public comment on the foreign policy that permitted what he regarded as the economic slavery of the natives in the provinces of British India.

His famous sermon, "The Use of Money," is an excellent example of his moral reasoning. Money is a "precious talent," but it is also the "mammon of unrighteousness," because it is so often dishonestly secured, or unrighteously employed. Reckless waste, the senseless storing up of wealth, selfish indulgence,--these are wrong uses. Right uses include modest self-support, provision for one's family, savings to maintain the business, the payment of obligations, and, above all, the aiding of others. Thus the dangers attending the increase of personal wealth are avoided, for as Methodists became prosperous, these dangers were a source of keen anxiety to him, on account of their corrosive effect upon character and personal integrity.

Gain all you can, is his formula, consistently with health and moral safety. Save all you can, avoiding waste or miserliness. Give all you can, for thus you escape the moral harm of riches, and are able to do much good.

Going down into copper and tin mines, visiting collieries, examining conditions in silk mills and cotton factories, observing the stands of grain in the fields, noting the changes in population, deploring the waste and destruction of life brought about by gin, encouraging the abolition of slavery, helping in prison reforms, writing William Pitt about taxation and the national debt,--these employments were a large part of his ministry. In his travels about England he saw and described in terse, graphic phrases, the miseries, needs and struggles of the people. John Wesley's Journal is no less illuminating in respect to social life in many of its aspects, than Defoe's Tours or Arthur Young's Journeys or Cobbett's Rides.

Another important document is the pamphlet entitled

Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions (1772), which begins with a dramatic picture of unemployed, starving people, snatching the bones brought in by dogs, in the days when war, bad harvests, and high prices had already begun the dreadful depression that followed the Napoleonic wars. From the problem of the unemployed and hungry, he presses his persistent "Why?" ruthlessly, step by step, through the various aspects of the national economy, until he comes to the foreign wars and the public debt. Although few economists would give this document more than a passing glance, it does some searching inquiry into the state of the nation, and it is interesting to note that Wesley's hint about the refunding of the National Debt was the very way taken by the Government in 1815 in the first attempts to recoup the national losses caused by the war. This kind of economic insight has not generally been attributed to Wesley.

The philanthropies undertaken by Wesley are only incidentally discussed in this study, but his work relief projects and his loan fund enterprises indicate his desire to lift his efforts above the level of ordinary charity and make people self-respecting and self-reliant.

His system of discipline throughout the vast organization he built up emphasizes this ethical religious viewpoint. Dismissal from the societies followed every case of habitual disregard of the rules against gambling, smuggling, stock speculation, endorsing of unsecured notes, or bankruptcy due to carelessness or unethical practices.

One might summarize by saying that Wesley believed economic activity to be divinely sanctioned. But this sanction is given by a just and righteous God, therefore the conditions under which one engages in industry must be morally valid. There is close correlation between success in business and the cultivation of moral qualities. The theory of divine ownership involves human stewardship and a strict account of the use of the fruits of industry. The rewards of economic activity are held in trust. God's directions as to our use of them in discharging social duties are explicit, therefore the criteria for determining right ways of earning and spending are found in the degree of their social usefulness, according to the will of God.

Human misery, poverty and distress are brought about by the moral failure of rich and poor to work out God's will in

society. The cure for social evils is therefore the rehabilitation of the individual will, with the resulting renewal of character. Such renewal transforms the vices and habits that destroy, into the virtues that lead inevitably to self-respect and to economic self-reliance. The mutual relationship of employer and worker, if founded upon the will and the love of God, is no longer a legal, but an ethical one, and each, by meeting his own distinctive responsibility, helps to establish right relations, out of which will come social justice.

Money is precious because of its social value. Conversely, wealth is dangerous because of its insidious attack upon the finer parts of character, as well as its disrupting effect on trade by imposing a luxury market, thus unsettling the prices and supplies of necessities for the poor.

These practical aspects of the good life are principles derived from religion, and emphasized in Methodist teaching, therefore right business conduct is a factor in determining eligibility to membership in the Wesleyan societies. So the religious impulse, coupled with the powerful moral imperative derived from it, depends for its effect upon individual effort, subject to the social control of the religious societies, and thus the Wesleyan ethic is established.

The conclusions as to social consequences arising from Wesley's work have been somewhat cautiously drawn in view of the difficulty of determining where particular influences begin and end.

The immediate results in reclaimed lives, and rehabilitated families, are attested by all historians, with varying degrees of approval as to method and effect. In the closing chapter I have tried to estimate the psychological value of the Wesleyan movement, in providing emotional release, and draining off certain accumulations of popular fear and panic such as are involved in revolutionary reactions.

The experience of men in the Wesleyan chapels was excellent training for their later political enfranchisement and industrial leadership. The strict morality of Methodist workmen and overseers made them valuable to the great industries.

The stimulation of thought and the awakening of minds through the literature so widely distributed by Wesley's men was

a further social contribution. The recognition of the common man, and the wholesale reclamation of forgotten and neglected masses, was among the greatest and most significant of the social consequences of the movement.

The emphasis upon experiential religion brought the fundamental facts of religion and of ethical obligation home to every individual, who was taught to regard himself as a capable and responsible member, not only of the Wesleyan societies, but of society in general.

The arousing and redirecting of the interests and sympathies of many thousands of people, meant a new large body of support for all movements for social amelioration, as John Howard in his prison work, and Wilberforce in the abolition of slavery, found to their satisfaction. Despite its official conservatism, after Wesley's death, Methodism contributed an impressive number of leaders in the reform movements, political and economic, of the early nineteenth century. This problem is not discussed at length in this paper, since the work is concerned with Wesley himself, but some reflections upon the continuing spirit of Wesley in the Methodist group are given expression.

Certainly he left in the Methodist organization a mood and a tradition of social responsibility and social justice that is a permanent reminder of the powerful impulse from which the Methodist church arose. At frequent intervals this spirit breaks through the institutionalism that sometimes obscures, but always contains, the potent spirit which informed its founder.

The study concludes with a comment upon what the writer regards as the chief difficulty, not only in Wesley's ethical approach, but that also of almost all religious groups and welfare movements today. The difficulty is that of attempting to apply an individual ethic to a complicated social system. The "industrial revolution" threatened to blot out, by sheer force of multiplied and disparate powers and aims, the individual ethic of the Wesleyan movement. The movement could not cope with it, any more than the private morality of church members and social reformers can cope with the ethical problems of an intricate and gigantic structure of public life, and national and international relationships. I have introduced here Thomson's study¹ of the

¹Hibbert Journal, Vol. XXXIV, 1935.

inadequacy of private morality in public action, as a starting point for constructive thinking on this unsolved problem of Wesley's day and ours. Where shall we begin to fashion a new public morality?

Another problem that amazed and distressed Wesley was the apparent ineffectiveness of Christianity to prevent spiritual harm and moral degeneracy arising from the very virtues it promoted. As Methodists prospered they changed and, in Wesley's eyes, degenerated. He is chagrined at the results of his own work. The idea of "an economy of abundance" and the moral implications involved, was something he was not prepared to reckon with. How can the moral sensitivity and social unity of a group be maintained in the face of this disturbing fact about the effects of the religious life?

The problem of the relation between religion and ethics in the future is one that presses closely home today. What kind of religion would support an ethic that could operate effectively in our modern world? Is it possible to have a secular morality independent of religious motivation, and what would be the source, the end, and the dynamic of such morality?

The tension created by economic necessity and opportunity on the one hand, and moral training on the other, is seen in vivid and dramatic ways in the eighteenth century. One may see such men as Daniel Defoe, for instance, struggling with it in his own way, and John Wesley in his. Morality was much discussed in those days, although the confusion regarding it is evident in the lack of its application in large areas of life.

Just when it seemed as though the Christian religion had exhausted itself in theological confusion and moral impotence, its vital spark was renewed in the brain and heart of John Wesley, and once more a sterile morality was revived and made effective through the power of the religious impulse. Can this process be repeated?

The resources for ethical aid are everywhere around us in the sciences that explain the individual, and the sciences that interpret his relation to society. The development of the intellectual resources of the individual give him further advantages today, and political liberty carries with it its own system of disciplinary judgment.

This thesis has demonstrated that a notable historical

event reveals the existence of certain basic problems in ethics, namely, (1) that a strictly individual ethic can, up to a certain point, have great influence upon public morality, but beyond that point, variously determined, it is practically helpless to effect lasting good in public affairs; and (2) that ethical relationships among men, however rational their basis, are doomed to failure unless there is brought to the aid of our highest intelligence and practical wisdom, some such powerful incentive and dynamic as is furnished by the religious motive.

In the particular field of research, it has been shown that the life and work of John Wesley exhibits a wide range of knowledge and interest in regard to economic life; that he had a standard of ethical values which he applied to this life, and that it was an essential part of the religion he preached and practised to make these standards effective in the social relationships in which he and his people were involved.

